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ABSTRACT

In order to develop competence in cross-cultural counseling, awareness of one's own culture must be developed. To survive, cultures incorporate both obvious mechanisms, like a distinctive language, and less obvious mechanisms, like patterns of thought. Culture acts as an invisible veil which prevents us from being aware of the cultural filters through which the world is viewed. Awareness of these less obvious filters, or barriers, is necessary before the effects of these barriers can be examined. The cultural predisposition is to call something that does not fit reality nonsense. By invoking nonsense, communication is closed and a barrier is created. A language barrier results from the function of language as representing experience. The tendency to overlook the powerful effects of language on perception and behaviors is testimony that culture is working to protect its own from the awareness of other realities. A need exists to stereotype, to perceive things in groups rather than attend individual instances. Things are seen only as there are words to describe them, thus providing another barrier. Descriptions can be implicit evaluations. Assertions may be misvalidated by addressing the object rather than the author. Extending counseling cross-culturally begins internally in the mind and heart of the counselor. The counselor who is aware that understanding another can be incomplete at best has hope of becoming an effective counselor. (ABL)

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Extending Counseling Cross-Culturally: Invisible Barriers

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Abstract

In spite of sincere intentions, counselor attempts at cross-cultural understanding are hindered by invisible barriers inherent in their own professional culture. The nature and function of some of these barriers are described and suggestions are made for identifying and penetrating them.

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Extending Cross-Cultural Counseling: Invisible Barriers

> White culture . . . is so interwoven in the fabric of everyday living that Whites cannot step outside and see their beliefs, values, and behaviors as creating a distinct cultural group. (Katz, 1985, p.617)

As the starting point in the process of developing competence in cross-cultural counseling, there is agreement that one must first develop awareness of one's own culture (e.g., Sue et al., 1982; Carney & Kahn, 1984; Ibrahim, 1985). This injunction to know first one's self is tacit recognition that whatever else is to be considered will be done through the lens of one's own culture. If we are to come to know and understand something outside ourselves, there must be some "cultural calibration" of the data-gathering instrument, ourselves.

Human culture has been construed as "world view", the way in which people perceive their relationship to nature, institutions, other people, and things (Sue, 1978). Within our general cultural heritage we create subcultures, as counselors, and as individuals (Axelson, 1985). Katz (1985) describes the counselor culture as having at its core a set of White cultural values and norms by which clients are judged. And, as individuals, we have our personal assumptive worlds created out of our needs to make sense of our experience as persons (Frank, 1973). Counselors, then, are acculturated simultaneously within a general, a professional, and a personal framework.

The main <u>function</u> of culture, according to Becker (1971), is to provide the individual with the conviction that he or she is

of primary value in a world of meaningful action. Culture provides individuals with the possibility for choice between options weighted according to degrees of rightness and wrongness. The extent to which one's choices are in harmony with the cultural context directly affects one's feelings of rightness, of OKness, of self-esteem. Becker views self-esteem as being at the very core of human adaptation because it buffers the individual against anxiety - a state that is inimical to effective, adaptive action. One's culture, then, is the basis of self-esteem.

If it is to fulfill effectively its primary function of providing the individual with the basis and context for experiencing self-esteem, any culture must represent "reality" to its members. The artificiality of the fictions which frame our culture, Becker (1971) says, must be denied, for to reveal the fictional nature of culture deprives life of its meaning and we become creatures like any other. To survive, to avoid confrontation with competing versions of reality, cultures incorporate both obvious mechanisms, like a distinctive language, and less obvious mechanisms, like patterns of thought. Culture acts as an invisible veil which prevents us from being aware of the cultural filters through which we view the world.

Awareness of an invisible filter is necessary before one can examine and modify its effects. The purpose of this paper is to indicate ways some of these less obvious barriers to broader

understanding can be recognized and to suggest how their effects might be countered in the service of building more accurate bases for cross-cultural communication and understanding. The first barrier to be considered is our use of the construct "nonsense". Several barriers associated with language usage will then be considered, and a metaphor for improving cross-cultural understanding will be suggested.

The Uses of Nonsense

> The importance of nonsense hardly can be overstated. The more clearly we experience something as 'nonsense', the more clearly we are experiencing the boundaries of our own self-imposed cognitive structures. 'Nonsense' is that which does not fit into the pre-arranged patterns which we have superimposed on reality. (Zukav, 1979, p.140)

Our habit, our cultural predisposition, when we encounter something that doesn't fit within our frame of reference is to place it firmly outside our reality by calling it nonsense. From our point of view we say "That's crazy", or "That's ridiculous", or "That's bizarre" and usually make no subsequent effort to see it in any other light. Having "understood" something as nonsense, we give up other ways of conceiving it, and communication ceases with our understanding unchanged and our world view secure, and our self-esteem intact.

In the play Galileo, Bertolt Brecht describes how Galileo's attempts to broaden the horizons of scientific knowledge in his community resulted in his imprisonment. One scene in particular

exemplifies the use of "nonsense." Galileo has invited Prince Cosimo di Medici and his entourage of scientific advisors to view the moons of Jupiter through the telescope. The Prince's scientific advisors greet the proposition that there are moons to be seen as nonsense. These experts "know" that Jupiter has no moons (and, furthermore, needs none), and they leave Galileo secure in their knowledge of the real world. The experts met Galileo, identified his proposition as nonsense, and emerged with their status and self-esteem intact. This exemplifies one function of "nonsense"; by invoking it communication is closed, further understanding is unnecessary, and the need to reconsider one's world view is avoided.

The quotation with which this section opens suggests another use of nonsense. Given the assumption of a lawful universe, the "nonsense" response indicates that one is inadequately comprehending what one is sensing. Our "nonsense" responses can be used as cues that the invisible cultural filters which maintain our world view are interfering with the possibility of our coming to understand something which our current world view does not comprehend. "Nonsense" can serve to indicate that one must seek further if one is to find a perspective from which nonsense is sensible. ". . . the concept of nonsense is relative, and we always can be sure when we use it that from some frame of reference it applies to us" (Zukav, 1979, p. 207).

Language-Related Barriers

Since counseling is based on communication between counselor and client, awareness of the presence and effects of barriers to accurate communication is extremely important. As one would expect, language is usually cited as one of the major barriers to cross-cultural communication. An obvious cultural language barrier exists when counselor and counselee have different mother tongues. The less obvious but no less problematic aspects of language to be considered here arise from the function of language as a system for representing experience. Language has been described as a map of our awareness and experience. Like other maps, the nature of our English language "map" and our habits of language usage directly influence the way we perceive, construe, and think about our selves, our clients, and our world (e.g. Vygotsky, 1962; Kelly, 1969; Lauver, Holiman & Kazama, 1982). Our tendency to overlook the powerful effects of language on our perceptions, beliefs and behaviors is testimony that our culture is working invisibly and effectively to protect us from the disquieting experience of awareness of other realities. These protective effects, however, operate subtly and invisibly to undermine and frustrate our efforts to walk in another person's shoes.

The remainder of this paper will identify the nature of some language-related filters and suggest ways in which their presence can be made more apparent and their biasing effects minimized.

Stereotyping

We have a need to stereotype, to lump, to perceive, think, and talk about things in groups rather than to attend individual instances (Johnson & Moeller, 1972). My first semester counseling students have a very difficult time learning to attend to single moments in life, to single examples of the counselee's complaint, yet this is what one must learn to do in order to become aware of the uniqueness of this person at this moment and in this specific environment.

We seem to have a need to perceive the similarities among things rather than their unique aspects, and a preference for dealing with the categories that result. We find ourselves talking about things (people, events) that are different as if they were alike; we handle conclusions as if they were data. And the distorting and distancing effects of seeing in stereotypes are confounded by the effects of another tendency.

Selective perception

We tend to see only those things we have words for. The rhetoric of the beliefs and expectations we bring to counseling relationships sensitizes us to particular aspects of human behavior. A client who arrives for counseling 23 minutes after the scheduled starting time can be seen as resistant, or as persistent, or as someone who arrived at 9:23, depending on the counselor's salient frame of reference. The words counselors bring to encounters with their clients "create" the clients they

come to know and respond to.

Believing is seeing. As an antidote to our tendency toward self-fulfilling prophecy, Jung admonishes counselors to "Learn your theories as well as you can, but put them aside when you touch the miracle of the human soul" (cited in Jacobi, 1953). Jung seems to be suggesting that understanding will be more accurate if one is attuned to first-level facts, the raw data of direct sensory experience. Zukav (1979) observes, "In the world of symbols, everything is either this or that. In the world of experience there are more alternatives available" (p. 286).

Implicit evaluation

We tend to judge in the guise of describing. Words are value laden. There are relatively few which do not impose a matrix of judgment around a kernel of fact. When we hear a politician reporting the "pacification" of some village, we know we are meant to hear the deaths of its former inhabitants as a good thing. We tend to scrutinize politicians and expect that their facts will be embedded in a matrix of values. We are less aware of the values encoded in the rhetoric we use as counselors.

We "describe" a client as resistant, or reticent, or unresponsive and act as if we have said nothing thereby about ourselves. Somehow it escapes us that "resistance" is a judgment of the beholder. The intrusion of personal value systems is more apparent when we report that we observe the client arrive at 9:23 and infer that the client is resistant. Either . . . or'ness

We have a tendency to dichotomize, to polarize issues by our manner of speaking. Given the declarative nature of our language, things are, or are not. "This soup is cold, or, That child is lazy." Both opinion and eternal truth are presented in the same form, a form which seems to set up the adversarial response and the hardening of positions. And the irony is that we can find ourselves on the defensive because of "is", when all we set out to do was communicate; the subsequent dialogue becoming more a search for the persuasive than a search for shared meaning. For the speaker, the tendency of "is" to evoke "is not" may be softened by using the "it seems to me" modifier. For example, "It seems to me the child is lazy." On the listening end, "Tell me what you mean by . . .," can serve to keep communication flowing, as in, "Tell me how the child seems lazy to you."

Misvalidation of assertions

We have a tendency to validate assertions by addressing the object rather than the author: "John has a bad attitude; Cheryl is intelligent." To validate these assertions, we look at John, or we look at Cheryl, accepting the implicit notion that these utterances describe reality. While we act as if utterances like this are about what is, they are more accurately viewed as reports about what seems-to-be from the perspective of the utterer. John's attitude and Cheryl's intelligence exist in the world of the beholder, the author of the statement. And again,

it is not to Cheryl that we must learn to turn, but to the author of the statement: "What leads you to believe that Cheryl is intelligent?"

Beginner's mind, Beginner's eyes

In summarizing this consideration of invisible barriers to understanding and the means of broaching these barriers, the metaphor of beginner's mind, beginner's eyes (Suzuki, 1970) seems apt. The expert brings a structure of knowledge, belief, and expectation to the thing, attuned to the "possibilities", attuned to those aspects that relate the thing to the known world, ready to fit the thing into the existing structure of the expert's world, or declare it nonsense. The beginner does not bring a mind full of existing categories to the thing, nor is it important to the beginner to move past the data to conclusion, nor to validate a previously held understanding. To paraphrase Suzuki, in the beginner's mind are many possibilities, in the expert's mind are few.

Extending counseling cross-culturally begins internally, it seems to me, in the mind and heart of the counselor. The counselor who can bring a beginner's mind and beginner's eyes to the task of understanding another, be open, nonjudgmental, accepting, and attuned to data at the sensory level, be ever skeptical of tentative assumptions, and be aware that understanding another can be incomplete at best has some hope, I believe, of becoming an effective counselor.

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